

Keeping Track of Office Files: A Commonsense Guide to Records Management for ILWU Affiliates

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Introduction

Local union “records” are primarily paper documents and files created by the union in the course of doing business, implementing programs and policies, and representing the membership. According to recordkeeping guidelines established by the ILWU International and the AFL-CIO George Meany Center for Labor Studies, union records that have long-term administrative and historical value should be kept permanently. The question is always whether the local affiliate has the facilities and staff necessary to keep these records—and understands how to organize the files in the first place.

However the files are organized, and however that arrangement has changed over time, it is important to maintain a central list of the files in the office that includes at least five pieces of information about the folders in the files:

- Filing category (e.g. Minutes or Correspondence);
- Folder title (or label);
- Folder location (e.g. specific room, file cabinet, box);
- Order in which the folders are filed (e.g. alphabetical); and
- Inclusive dates of the materials within the folder.

Any changes to the filing system also should be noted. This will all help to facilitate storage and retrieval of files and documents regardless of inconsistencies in filing practices. **It is also essential to date every document and piece of correspondence (dd/mm/yy).**

The files and documents of ILWU affiliates, unless specified otherwise in the union’s constitution or by-laws, are the property of the affiliate which has the authority to determine its overall records management policies and procedures. It is essential to define ownership of the union records and who or what body has the authority to maintain and dispose of the records. **Special**

care must also be taken during times of transition: When, for example, an officer retires or is replaced and when a unit becomes defunct or disbands. Existing files are the property of the affiliate and must not be discarded or destroyed or taken home by the officer.

Management System Principles for Local Union Records: Simplicity and Posterity

Records are managed through a life cycle, from creation through stages of use and storage, to final disposition. There is a progression over time: documents and files are first created and kept near the person who uses them, then as they are referred to less frequently, the records are moved farther away from the original user. In the end, long after the original administrative use ceases, the records may be used for entirely different purposes of research by entirely different kinds of users. This might include scholarly or legal research, as well as genealogy or investigation of eligibility for pension or other benefits. In order for this records management system to work, it has to be efficient and simple for the benefit of the union's representatives and its clerical employees.

Records Retention Schedule for ILWU Affiliates, Divisions, and Units

The records retention schedule is a basic element of a records management system for any organization. Good business practice requires that for any disposition of records, the decision to destroy or preserve them must systematically follow an approved written schedule and documented procedures. The records retention schedule is a list of the types of documents and records that are created and used by the union, with the period of years each must be retained to comply with legal and business requirements, to provide for current and projected administrative needs, and to identify materials that should be retained permanently for historical purposes.

It is also important to emphasize that different locals have different needs when it comes to file creation and management. Many larger locals, for example, have extensive and complex procedures in place for conducting union business (such as elections or contract administration) that may require more detailed categories and sub-

categories than are included here. While each can adapt the following schedule to their particular needs, the principles of simplicity and consistency should be priority objectives of any records management system.

The recommendations here reflect a simplified combination of legal, regulatory, and organizational requirements and generally exceed usual recommendations by auditors, attorneys, and the U.S. Department of Labor. These recommendations primarily address types of materials unique to labor organizations and their history. **Not** detailed here are specific guidelines for common types of business office files such as personnel records, confidential information, emergency procedures, and data backup.

Basically, documents are kept for three or seven years, and then either discarded, destroyed or, if classified as *permanent*, transferred for permanent storage. Many auditors and attorneys have different recommendations. When this happens, it is suggested the affiliate follow the longest time period for retention and that simplicity and consistency remain a priority.

The following items can be discarded from files designated for permanent storage:

- Out-of-date office equipment manuals and instructions;
- Obsolete non-ILWU serial publications (e.g. directories);
- Duplicates of superseded forms and procedures;
- Third copies of affiliate publications;
- Non-ILWU event flyers, newsletters;
- Old magazines and newspapers available at area libraries.

Note: Permanent storage involves transfer of the files to a safe, secure and environmentally protected storage area (on-site or off-site) after seven years.

Because a retention schedule is often subject to revision as the records management program is implemented, it is suggested that changes to the retention schedule, including the documents listed and their retention periods, be approved by at least the Secretary-Treasurer or other officer in charge of the affiliate's records and documents. Questions concerning implementation of a records management system and retention schedule can also be directed to the ILWU librarian (who can also

help locate assistance from archivists and records managers in the affiliate's local area).

A clear and comprehensive review of best practices covering all aspects of creating, maintaining, and disposing of files and other materials is available in the AFL-CIO publication **How to Keep Union Records: A Guide for Local Union Officers and Staff**, which is also available from the ILWU library.

A Note about Email & Electronic Documents:

Email has many uses that often substitute for what used to be telephone calls, voice messages, faxes, telegrams, memoranda, and letters. This means there is no clear and simple procedure to handle all email messages sent and received by union representatives and the union's clerical employees. To the extent that email messages are part of the union's legal or historical record, they must be kept in an organized, retrievable way—and individuals who decide what is to be kept and what is to be deleted should bear in mind that email messages are generally vulnerable to discovery motions in litigation. Considering all the variables affecting decisions about if, where, why and how email messages can or should be stored, there are three basic guidelines to be followed:

- 1)** Messages that document subjects for which paper documents are filed, such as general correspondence, collective bargaining and grievance handling, should be printed out and filed like any other paper document.
- 2)** Electronic files in which email messages are stored should mirror the system and file names used for paper documents. Creation of electronic documents and digital files, including PDF documents, can cause confusion and problems over time if the electronic folders are not carefully and consistently named—just like files and folders containing paper documents.
- 3)** Offices that rely on electronic and digitized documents need to monitor technology and software applications to make certain the new technology can read and retrieve documents created and filed with older software.

Suggested Records Retention Schedule for ILWU Offices

	Record Category	Retention Period
Administration		
	Executive Board Meeting Minutes	Permanent
	Membership Meeting Minutes	Permanent
	Committee/Other Minutes (e.g. Stewards Council)	Permanent
	Reports to meetings (filed with above minutes)	Permanent
	Constitution and By-Laws	Permanent
	Regulatory Compliance Filings & Reports	Permanent
Correspondence		
	Correspondence - Outgoing (inc. Circular Letters)	Permanent
	Correspondence - Incoming	Permanent
	Internal Directives, Memos & Reports	Permanent
Programs		
	Education/Training	Permanent
	Political Action	Permanent
	Organizing	Permanent
	Pensioners Clubs	Permanent
	Sports Program	Permanent
	Membership Services	Permanent
	Workers Compensation Cases	Permanent
Officers Files		
	Officers' Employment/Personnel Files	Permanent
	Officers' Office Files	Permanent
	Officers' Personal Files	Permanent
	Subject Reference Files (Usually background information collected from a variety of sources on topics related to the union's programs and activities, or to the union representative's individual activities and responsibilities. Careful thought should therefore be given to the historical value of these files before discarding items from them or not keeping them permanently).	Discretionary
Financial Records		
	Cancelled checks, Receipts, Bills	7 years
	Summary Statements, Auditor Reports, Ledger	Permanent
Contract Administration		
	Agreements and signed MOUs, Letters of Understanding	Permanent
	Grievance Files and Notes	Permanent
	Negotiations Files and Notes	Permanent
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Record Category (Cont'd)	Retention Period
Events Documentation	
Photographs	Permanent
Audio-visual recordings and films	Permanent
Program artifacts	Permanent
Publicity/news about the union	Permanent
Election Records	
Ballots & Voter Lists	3 Years
Balloting Committee Reports & Election Procedures	Permanent
Company Files	
Leaves of Absence	7 years
Employee/Seniority Lists	Permanent
Job Descriptions	Permanent
Company Data	Permanent
Company Employee Handbooks	Permanent
Company Pension/Insurance Plans	Permanent
Stewards' Files	Permanent
Membership Records	Permanent
Dues	Permanent
Publications (By the affiliate)	Permanent
Newsletters	Permanent
Flyers, leaflets, pamphlets	Permanent
Personnel Files (Kept secure and confidential)	Permanent

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